



# COMPANION STUDY GUIDE

## ABOUT THE FILM:

It's back to school time... And a group of 17-year-old boys are returning to the classroom for their last year in high school in the world's most dangerous city—Baghdad.

Suicide bombings, mortar attacks and kidnappings are tearing their city apart. Their first day of school is October 1, 2006, the beginning of the most violent month since the Americans came.

Citywide curfews lasting days are the norm. But in the those 31 days of October, 2,722 men, women and children will die violently, many because of their religion. The boys, however, are a tight group of friends regardless of their different religious, ethnic and economic backgrounds.

The four friends chat excitedly in the schoolyard at Tariq bin Ziad High School for Boys. They have a lot to talk about: girls, Britney Spears, who has the best ripped jeans and who's hair is the spikiest or is a disaster. It seems pretty normal, but it isn't.

# ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS:

## DIRECTOR, IVAN O'MAHONEY



A freelance film director and founder of StoryLabTV Ltd, Ivan recently moved to Sydney, Australia, with his wife Tash, an architect, and son Finnegan, a two year old demolition expert. Ivan holds degrees in international law (Leiden University, the Netherlands) and journalism (Columbia University, New York). In former lives he was a UN peacekeeper in Bosnia and worked as an attorney in the Netherlands. Ivan's 2006 film 'How to Plan a Revolution' had its North American premiere at HotDocs and won that year's Prix Europa. Other gongs include the RFK Journalism Award, the Amnesty International Media Award and a Golden Nymph. His films for broadcasters like BBC, Channel 4 UK, PBS, and CNN have taken him among others to Angola, Ethiopia, Iraq, Colombia, Congo and Sudan. *Baghdad High* is his first film for HBO. He is currently learning how to surf, against the advice of his family and friends.

## DIRECTOR, LAURA WINTER



*Baghdad High* is Laura Winter's directorial debut. She has worked as a freelance producer for CNN, for CBS 60 Minutes and CBS Evening News in the U.S., Iraq and Afghanistan. In Kabul she was the radio correspondent for CBS News. She has filed stories and shot photos in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan for the Christian Science Monitor, the New York Daily News and other newspapers and magazines. She has also worked as a newspaper reporter in Los Angeles, Washington, D.C. and Hong Kong. Prior to becoming a journalist, she was an English teacher in Taiwan and China. Laura was born May 21, 1969 and was raised in Sierra Madre, California. She earned her B.A. in International Relations from New York University and her M.S. from Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. She has taken her life off the road and now lives in London with her partner, Nick Turner.

# ON MAKING *BAGHDAD HIGH*:

"We set out to give a voice to those people you never hear and see on the evening news. Presidents and prime ministers, generals and militants always make it onto the airwaves, claiming they know something of Iraq's future. With this film we wanted to push the story forward. We wanted this film to cut through the spin and go to the real source of Iraq's future: the teenage generation. Through contacts in the country we found a fantastic school whose student body still reflected the ethnic and religious mix that made up pre-war Iraq. As Baghdad was rapidly being divided into segregated Sunni and Shia zones, Tariq bin Ziad High School for Boys was holding on to the notion of a united Iraq for all Iraqis. After discussions with the school's headmaster and some serendipity we enlisted four 17-year-old boys, one Shia, one Christian, one Kurd and one from a mixed Sunni-Shia background, who span the socio-economic range. We gave them cameras and trained

them to film their own stories at home and at school. As they were sending us their tapes, which totalled more than 300 hours, we toiled like worker bees, translating and transcribing, sifting through their sequences until we found their narrative threads, which we then wove into the film you see today. At the start of the project we might have hoped for but could not really have imagined just how profound the boys' film work would be and how much it would teach us about Iraq. This has been a truly collaborative effort between different ethnicities, different religions, teenagers and adults, Iraqis and Westerners. And the fact that the kids are all from different backgrounds, and yet remained friends as their city was torn to bits by sectarian violence, was one of the most satisfying parts of making *Baghdad High*. It filled us with great hope for Iraq's future and maybe ours too."

—Ivan O'Mahoney and Laura Winter

# ABOUT THE STUDENTS FEATURED IN BAGHDAD HIGH:

- ⇒ **Anmar** is a church-attending Catholic. While his favorite subject in and outside of school is girls, he somehow forces himself to study.
- ⇒ **Hayder** is a not-so-religious Shia Muslim. He yearns to strut on a stage with a microphone in his hand, belting out his own love songs.
- ⇒ **Ali**, a Kurd, strives to keep his cool-factor high. He dreams of being an architect.
- ⇒ **Mohammed**, of mixed Sunni/Shia background, doesn't really know what he wants to be yet. Mohammad is simply happy to be the joker of the bunch.

## A FEW THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT IRAQ:

### BASIC FACTS ABOUT IRAQ:

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- ⇒ **Capital:** Baghdad
- ⇒ **Government:** Developing parliamentary republic
- ⇒ **Official Languages:** Arabic, Kurdish
- ⇒ **Population:** 2007 estimate 29,267,000
- ⇒ **Religions:** Sunni, Shiite, Kurd
- ⇒ **GDP (Gross Domestic Product):** \$89.8 Billion Total, \$2,900 Per capita (2006 estimate)

### ABOUT THE REPUBLIC OF IRAQ

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Iraq is a country in Western Asia spanning most of the northwestern end of the Zagros mountain range, the eastern part of the Syrian Desert and the northern part of the Arabian Desert.

Iraq's rich history dates back to ancient Mesopotamia. The region between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers is identified as the cradle of civilization and the birthplace of writing. During its long history, Iraq has been the center of the Akkadian, Assyrian, Babylonian and Abbasid empires, and part of the Achaemenid, Macedonian, Parthian, Sassanid, Umayyad, Mongol, Ottoman, and British empires.

Comprising 112 billion barrels of proven oil, Iraq ranks second in the world behind Saudi Arabia in the amount of Oil reserves; the United States Department of Energy estimates that up to 90% of the country remains unexplored. These regions could yield an additional 100 billion barrels. Iraq's oil production costs are among the lowest in the world, but only about 2,000 oil wells have been drilled in Iraq, compared with about 1 million wells in Texas alone.

Iraq was under Baath Party rule from 1968 to 2003; in 1979 Saddam Hussein took control and remained president until 2003 after which he was unseated by a US-led invasion.

Under the terms of a new constitution—strongly supported by the Shia and Kurdish communities but largely rejected by the Sunni—the country conducted fresh nationwide parliamentary elections on December 15 to elect a new government. The overwhelming majority of all three major ethnic groups in Iraq voted along ethnic lines, turning this vote into more of an ethnic census than a competitive election, and setting the stage for the division of the country along ethnic lines. Iraqi politicians have been under significant threat by the various factions that have promoted violence as a political weapon.

Iraq has number of ethnic minority groups in Iraq: Kurds, Assyrians, Mandeans, Iraqi Turkmen, Shabaks and Roma. These groups have not enjoyed equal status with the majority Arab populations throughout Iraq's eighty-five year history. These ethnic groups continue to suffer discrimination on religious or ethnic grounds.

# HISTORICAL CONFLICTS BETWEEN THE US AND IRAQ:

## GULF WAR

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The **Gulf War** or **Persian Gulf War** (August 2, 1990 – February 28, 1991) was a conflict between Iraq and a coalition force from 34 nations authorized by the United Nations (UN) and led primarily by the United States in order to return Kuwait to the control of the Emir of Kuwait. The conflict developed in the context of the Iran-Iraq War and in 1990 Iraq accused Kuwait of stealing Iraq's oil through slant drilling. Iraq also launched missiles against targets in Saudi Arabia and Israel in retaliation for their support of the invading forces in Kuwait.

Since an invasion in 2003, a multinational coalition of forces, mainly American and British, has occupied Iraq. The invasion has had wide-reaching consequences: increased civil violence, political breakdown, the removal and execution of former authoritarian President Saddam Hussein, and national problems in the development of political balance, economy, infrastructure, and use of the country's huge reserves of oil.

## SIX IMPORTANT MOMENTS SURROUNDING THE *CURRENT* WAR

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1. In 2003, the U.S. government alleged that Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction.
2. U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell made the case to the U.N. Security Council, showing aerial photographs of what were thought to be chemical weapons sites and mobile labs.
3. On March 19, 2003, as coalition forces led by the United States prepared to attack, President Bush made a speech from the White House.

“Peaceful efforts to disarm the Iraqi regime have failed again and again because we are not dealing with peaceful men,” the president said. “Intelligence gathered by this and other governments leaves no doubt that the Iraq regime continues to possess and conceal some of the most lethal weapons ever devised.”
4. Coalition forces overthrew Saddam's dictatorship within weeks, sending him into hiding.
5. By May 1, 2003, the president declared the end of major combat operations from an aircraft carrier decorated with a banner reading “Mission Accomplished.”
6. No weapons of mass destruction were ever found in Iraq, though teams of weapons specialists carried out an extensive search. Bush administration official Condoleezza Rice later said that intelligence reports pointing to the existence of weapons may have been incorrect.

(Source: Newshour, PBS.org)

## ...SINCE THE CONFLICT BEGAN IN 2003:

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- ⇒ Nearly 4,000 American soldiers have died and another 30,000 injured (Source: The Washington Post)
- ⇒ About 171 British soldiers have died. (Source: The Guardian)
- ⇒ Between 200,000 and 600,000 Iraqis have died. (Source: The Guardian)
- ⇒ Economists estimate that the war has cost the United States an estimated \$3 trillion dollars (Source: The Washington Post)



## FIVE YEARS LATER:

Five years into the war in Iraq, the United States is still working to secure the country and create conditions for a lasting peace between religious factions. In the years since the war began, Iraq has achieved a democratically elected government and its ousted leader, Saddam Hussein, was captured and put to death for war crimes. But divisions between two sects of Islam, Sunni and Shiite, have caused a violent rift in the country, and the U.S. military has faced a brutal insurgency.

In the years following the invasion, militia fighters and members of the terrorist group dubbed Al-Qaeda in Iraq targeted U.S. military operations. Sunni fighters and Al-Qaeda in Iraq members went after U.S. soldiers and rival Shiites with guerilla tactics like roadside bombs and attacks on busy markets.

## FURTHER WATCHING:

### ***NO END IN SIGHT* (2007) DIRECTED BY CHARLES FERGUSON**

A documentary film that focuses on alleged serious mistakes made by the Bush administration in the two year period following the invasion of Iraq in March 2003. The film portrays these errors as the cause of ensuing problems in Iraq, such as the rise of the insurgency, a lack of security and basic utilities for many Iraqis, sectarian violence and, at one point, the risk of complete civil war.

### ***IRAQ IN FRAGMENTS* (2006) DIRECTED BY JAMES LONGLEY**

*Iraq in Fragments* illuminates post-war Iraq in three acts, building a picture of a country pulled in different directions by religion and ethnicity. Filmed in verité style with no scripted narration, the film explores the lives of ordinary Iraqis to illustrate and give background to larger trends in Iraqi society.

### ***STOP-LOSS* (2007) DIRECTED BY KIMBERLEY PEIRCE**

A narrative film in which decorated Iraq war hero Sgt. Brandon King makes a celebrated return to his small Texas hometown following his tour of duty. He tries to resume the life he left behind. Then, against Brandon's will, the Army orders him back to duty in Iraq, which upends his world. The conflict tests everything he believes in: the bond of family, the loyalty of friendship, the limits of love and the value of honor.

### ***CONTROL ROOM* (2004) DIRECTED BY JEHANE NOUJAIM**

A documentary providing a rare window into the international perception of the Iraq War, courtesy of Al Jazeera, the Arab world's most popular news outlet. Roundly criticized by Cabinet members and Pentagon officials for reporting with a pro-Iraqi bias, and strongly condemned for frequently airing civilian casualties as well as footage of American POWs, the station has revealed (and continues to show the world) news about the Iraq War that the Bush administration did not want it to see.

# ONLINE READING:

## 5 YEARS, 5 IRAQIS

[news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/7305270.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7305270.stm)

In a series of special reports to mark five years since the US-led invasion of Iraq, the BBC's Hugh Sykes and Jim Muir have been talking to five Iraqis to see how they have been affected by the crisis.

# FURTHER READING:

## OVER THERE: FROM THE BRONX TO BAGHDAD

By Alan Feuer

A memoir by a New York Times reporter who was transferred from the Bronx Borough news desk to a new assignment—one that entailed working in, and writing about, Baghdad.

## PERSEPOLIS: THE STORY OF A CHILDHOOD

By Marjane Sartrapi

Although not about Iraq, Persepolis is a graphic novel that deals with a young woman growing up and living in war-torn Iran and dealing with religious strife, political turmoil and censorship.

## BAGHDAD BURNING: GIRL BLOG FROM IRAQ

By Riverbend

A collection of blog entries from a young woman living in present-day Baghdad.

## THE LOOMING TOWER: AL-QAEDA AND THE ROAD TO 9/11

By Lawrence Wright

*The Looming Tower* tells the story through the interweaving lives of four men: the two leaders of al-Qaeda, Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri; the FBI's counterterrorism chief, John O'Neill; and the former head of Saudi intelligence, Prince Turki al-Faisal.

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ⇒ Why do you think that, for a high school student in New York City, that this film is important to watch?
- ⇒ Did you relate at all to the boys from the film? How so?
- ⇒ In what ways do you think that there are differences between you and the boys living in Baghdad?
- ⇒ Describe a day in your life as a high school student. What does this day consist of? Who are your friends, what do you do after school? What are your three favourite material possessions?
  - ⇒ Now, take the above list and remove anything that you don't think you would be able to do or have if you were one of the students shown in the film?
  - ⇒ Now, describe what you think your day would be like if you had to remove all of these items, freedoms and comforts etc.?
- ⇒ The four boys in *Baghdad High* are all from different cultures and religions. How do you think that their religious affiliations affect their lives and interactions?
- ⇒ Do you feel that there are the same reactions to people's cultures and religions in New York? If no, why not? If yes, how so?
- ⇒ On the news, you have probably hear a great deal about the conflict in Iraq. After seeing *Baghdad High*, do you feel differently about the situation? What have you learned? Do you feel more connected to people who live in Iraq? Why or why not?
- ⇒ From watching the media, how would you say that people from Iraq are portrayed? How are the teens in this film different from the media's portrayal? Do you think there is a stereotypical idea of what an Iraqi citizen might be like? Why do you think this is?

# HOW TO GET INVOLVED:

**VOTE!** (Or if you aren't old enough to vote, get involved with making sure that others do!) One of the primary issues at stake in the upcoming election has to do with US involvement in Iraq—if you aren't happy with the way things are going, the most important thing you can do is make your voice heard!

Whether the film inspires you to action or you have other causes that are important to you—get involved! Here are some suggestions from UNICEF on how to take action and make a difference for ANY cause that you believe in.:

- ⇒ Start an awareness campaign
- ⇒ Teach a class
- ⇒ Hold a fundraiser
- ⇒ Write a petition
- ⇒ Perform a play

## ORGANIZATIONS THAT ARE TAKING ACTION:

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In addition, check out any one of these organizations to begin taking action now!

- ⇒ The American Red Cross ([www.redcross.org](http://www.redcross.org))
- ⇒ Action without Borders ([www.idealists.org](http://www.idealists.org))
- ⇒ Doctors without Borders ([www.doctorswithoutborders.org](http://www.doctorswithoutborders.org))
- ⇒ Oxfam ([www.oxfamamerica.org](http://www.oxfamamerica.org))

## POLITICAL ACTION:

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- ⇒ **Email Congress:** Email a letter to your Congressional representatives, urging them act responsibly for peace and stability in Iraq.
- ⇒ **Call Congress:** Call the Capital Switchboard at 202-224-3121 to connect with your Representatives to ask for sustained US leadership to end the war in Iraq.